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Heterogeneity in Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in Schools and Potential Implications for the Future of Catholic Schools

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Abstract: Do parental priorities for what children should learn in school differ depending on the type of school chosen by parents? Does this, in turn, have potential implications for the future of Catholic schools in the United States? This article considers these questions in the context of the long-term decline in enrollment in U.S. Catholic schools. Specifically, the article considers three questions: 1) What are the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school in the overall population? 2) Do these priorities differ between different groups of parents, including parents with children in Catholic schools and parents willing to consider Catholic schools for their children but not having enrolled their children in one? And 3) Are there individual parental characteristics associated with particular views about what children should learn in schools? Implications of the findings are discussed, specifically concerning targeted efforts to attract new students. The analysis is based on a market research survey implemented in 2017.

Keywords: K-12 education, Catholic schools, United States, parental priorities

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Enrollment in K–12 Catholic schools in the United States has been declining for more than a half century. There was a small rebound in enrollment in 2021–22, but this was after a much larger drop the previous year due to the pandemic.¹ In comparison to the mid-1960s, current enrollment in Catholic elementary and secondary schools has dropped by about two thirds. Broad societal trends point to the risk of further losses in enrollment in the future. These trends include lower fertility rates and less immigration, leading to a reduction in the number of school-aged children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), a smaller share of adults identifying as Catholics or Christians (Smith et al., 2019), and limited gains in incomes in real terms; this latter, together with rising operating costs in Catholic schools and therefore rising tuition, makes the schools less affordable for much of the population.

To survive, if not thrive, Catholic schools will need to demonstrate that they provide students with a distinctive educational experience that responds to parental priorities for what children should learn in schools. That educational experience should ideally be attractive not only to parents who already have children enrolled in Catholic schools, but also to parents who are willing to consider Catholic schools for their children but have not enrolled their children in one. This may be a challenge because the priorities of both groups of parents may not be the same, leading to trade-offs.

As a first step, to consider options for stemming the long-term decline in enrollment, Catholic school administrators should be aware of what these sets of parental priorities may be. Building on a (2018) market research report by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA) and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and using the survey data collected for that report, this article presents a simple yet hopefully informative secondary analysis of the data, with a focus on parental priorities for what children should learn in school and their potential implications for the future of Catholic schools. Importantly, the analysis of parental priorities for what children should learn in school is not normative. No judgment is made as to whether some parental priorities may be more important than others for Catholic schools. The analysis simply documents what the parental priorities are. There are normative aspects when discussing the implications of the findings for school policy, but this discussion is left for the conclusion.

In particular, the aim of the analysis is to compare priorities of parents with children in Catholic schools with the priorities of parents who are willing to consider such a school but have not enrolled

¹ On the drop in enrollment due to the pandemic and the recent partial rebound, see the analysis by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA, 2022). On the broader impact of the pandemic on Catholic schools in the United States and globally, see Wodon (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) in the special issue of this journal on this topic. On the decline in enrollment in the United States, see Murnane and Reardon (2018) and Wodon (2018, 2020d).

their children in one. Understanding the heterogeneity in parental priorities for what children should learn in school could have implications for the management of schools and how schools approach the student experience. For example, should Catholic schools emphasize academic excellence and skills for college and the labor market, or should they place a stronger emphasis on the transmission of the faith and values. Ideally, both objectives would go hand in hand, but in practice, trade-offs may occur. Stemming the long-term decline in enrollment will require savvy decision making by school administrators. While Catholic schools should obviously remain faithful to their evangelical mission—understanding parental priorities, and the potential for heterogeneity in these priorities between groups of parents—is likely to provide important information for decision makers.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides context for the analysis with a brief literature review focusing on two core aspects of the value proposition of Catholic schools: academic excellence, and the transmission of faith and values. The framework for the analysis and a description of the data used are provided next. Key findings from the analysis follow, considering first basic statistics and then regression analysis, with three questions being answered: 1) What are the priorities of parents for what their children should learn in school in the overall population? 2) Do these priorities differ between different groups of parents, including parents with children in a Catholic school and parents willing to consider Catholic schools for their children but not having enrolled their children in one? And 3) Are there individual parental characteristics associated with particular views about what children should learn in schools? Potential implications of the findings are then discussed. The overall argument being made is that if Catholic schools are to stem the long-term decline in enrollment observed for more than 50 years, they may need to be more responsive to the priorities of parents who are willing to consider Catholic schools for their children but have not enrolled their children in one—in other words, to look beyond just the priorities of parents with children currently enrolled.

Context and Brief Literature Review

Many parents in the United States have multiple schooling options for their children in the area where they live. Apart from public schools, Catholic schools, other types of religious schools, and private secular schools offer their services. In addition, some states also have large networks of charter (public) schools. For highly talented children, magnet schools are yet another option, and some parents also choose to rely on home schooling to educate their children. This diversity of educational options implies that most Catholic schools operate in a highly competitive environment.

For those not familiar with the education systems in the United States, it is important to note that by and large, Catholic schools do not benefit from recurrent public spending, whether at the local, state, or federal level. They need to recover their operational costs mostly from tuition and

donations. A growing number of state-sponsored programs provide vouchers or tax credits that reduce out-of-pocket costs for parents choosing to enroll their children in a Catholic or other private school, but most of these programs are still relatively small. When tuition must cover costs, it remains a constraint for many parents interested in Catholic schools. This also means that to attract students, Catholic schools must perform better than public and charter schools (and other types of private schools) in some dimensions that matter to parents—even though they often have fewer resources to do so. This is a rather difficult task, but it is the challenge with which Catholic schools in the United States are confronted.

What are those dimensions that matter to parents? When positioning themselves to attract students, Catholic schools tend to emphasize a) their academic excellence and b) the transmission of the faith and values, or more generally what schools commonly refer to as their “Catholic identity.” This emphasis makes sense, and it corresponds broadly to the reasons why many parents enroll their children in Catholic schools today. But this emphasis has clearly not been sufficient to stem the long-term decline in enrollment in Catholic schools. To explain why this may be the case and provide context for the analysis that follows, this section briefly discusses some of the literature on these issues.

Academic Excellence and Skills

Consider first the issue of academic excellence and more broadly the skills that students need to acquire to be successful in college and/or in the labor market. Do Catholic schools have a specific claim to academic excellence and helping students acquire those skills; and, if so, is that claim likely to help stem the long-term decline in enrollment? The answer to this two-part question is likely “yes” for the first part, but “no” for the second. This would suggest that an emphasis by Catholic schools on academic excellence may well be necessary, but it may not be sufficient to attract more students.

Academic excellence in Catholic schools—or the possibility of a “Catholic school advantage”—is a hypothesis suggested 40 years ago by Coleman et al. (1982) and Greeley (1982) (among others), and later by Coleman and Hoffer (1987) and Bryk et al. (1993). These authors advanced the possibility of a Catholic school effect leading to good student performance, thanks in part to an emphasis in the schools and broader Catholic community on excellence and social justice. The idea was that, especially for disadvantaged students, enrolling in a Catholic school could be beneficial.

Subsequent rigorous studies attempting to control for self-selection seemed to confirm Catholic schools’ good performance, at least in terms of high school and college graduation rates for students. Evans and Schwab (1995) and Sander and Krautmann (1995) argued that Catholic schools performed better than public schools on the likelihood that students would finish high school (or avoid dropping out before completion) and start college. Neal (1997) and Altonji et al. (2005) also

identified gains in high school and college graduation rates. Neal (1997) suggested the possibility of higher wages for low-income and minority students in Catholic schools, likely because quality school options for these students were limited where they lived. With more recent data, Freeman and Berends (2016) again showed that attending a Catholic school could increase the likelihood of going to college.

However, the claim of an association between attending a Catholic school and doing well on standardized tests is more disputed. Some early studies found a positive association. For example, Sander (1996) found that eight years in a Catholic school was associated with higher vocabulary, mathematics, and reading test scores for non-Catholics attending Catholic grade schools. Yet subsequent studies found no similar relationships. For example, Altonji et al. (2005) reported no or little effect of Catholic schools on test scores, as did Hallinan and Kubitschek (2010). Analyzing the performance of students shifting schools in Indianapolis, Berends and Waddington (2018) also found no gain for students shifting to a Catholic school from another school (there was actually a loss for student performance in mathematics). Other studies also suggesting no Catholic school advantage for various metrics include Jepsen (2003) and Elder and Jepsen (2014).

Overall, it seems fair to conclude that while the literature suggests the possibility of a Catholic school advantage for higher educational attainment—including up to the college level—the benefit of attending a Catholic school for student performance on standardized tests in elementary and secondary school is less clear. In addition, when such benefits are observed, they tend to be reaped mostly by low-income or otherwise disadvantaged students. This is great news for the mission of Catholic schools to serve those at the periphery, but it may not substantially aid efforts to stem the decline in enrollment, since many of those students are from families that may require tuition reduction. As a result, while emphasizing academic excellence is important, since the Catholic school advantage tends to be observed mostly for low-income students unlikely to attend Catholic schools without financial support, the schools' ability to rely on academic excellence to stem the decline in enrollment may be limited. Said differently, students from well-to-do families who can afford to pay tuition may not do much better academically in Catholic schools than in other types of private schools or upper-tier public schools. Affluent parents can do their own research and may not be convinced by claims of academic excellence in Catholic schools relative to that of other private schools or even high-quality public schools.

Faith Transmission and Values

Another way in which Catholic schools have marketed themselves is through an emphasis on their Catholic identity and transmission of the faith and values. While an emphasis on academic excellence and skills for college and the labor market may appeal to a broad swath of the population, an emphasis on the transmission of the faith tends to appeal mostly to parents who are Catholic

themselves, though there may be exceptions: for example, for parents affiliated with other religions or denominations who may appreciate the emphasis on faith in Catholic schools as long as it is not to the exclusion of other faiths. The emphasis on values may have a broader appeal, but by and large, all schools, whether public or private, aim to transmit strong positive values to their students.

As is the case for the academic performance of Catholic schools, there is a literature on Catholic identity and the role played by faith in leading some parents to choose Catholic or other religious schools. One of the early studies by Convey (1986) looked at factors leading parents to send their children to Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. Academic factors played an important role—especially for higher-income parents and parents who were not themselves Catholic—but religion and a perception that the schools provided good discipline also mattered. Using national survey data, Sander (2005) found, not surprisingly, that Catholics, evangelicals, and other parents attending religious services regularly were more likely to send their children to private and religious schools. Cohen-Zada and Sander (2008) found similar effects and argue (in reference to the literature on the Catholic school advantage) that failing to take into account religiosity in modeling school choice may lead to overstating the effect of private/religious schools on measures of educational attainment.

Other analyses concerning school identity are framed within the literature on branding within a context of school choice. Brands are strategies used by firms to communicate information about their goods or services to actual and potential consumers. As noted by Cheng et al. (2016), schools also rely on branding; their analysis suggests that parents valuing specific school characteristics tend to choose schools espousing those characteristics in their branding. For example, parents valuing religious education and discipline tend to choose Catholic or Lutheran schools over public or private secular schools. Similarly, Trivitt and Wolf (2011) assessed whether Catholic schools in Washington, D.C., carry an identifiable education brand. They found that the Catholic school brand is perceived as attractive, familiar, and generally accurate, but when schools do not meet the expectations of their brand, attrition follows.

The fact that the Catholic identity of the schools matters to parents does not imply that academic excellence does not also matter. Pelz and Dulk (2018) tested whether enrollment in religious schools tends to be motivated by the desire to transmit one's faith to one's children or by the "secular goods" also associated with religious-based education; they found evidence that both factors play a role. Yet in some cases, there can be tension between various aspects of religious schools. Based on secondary analysis of a case study on school leadership, Fuller and Johnson (2014) explored whether, in practice, the explicit identity of Catholic schools pertaining to campus ministry, faith formation, and community service may be sidelined to focus instead on academic excellence, as measured by standardized tests or college acceptance. The authors suggest that taking Catholic identity seriously may help improve academic excellence. For parents, too, as noted by Arends

(2021) in qualitative work for New Jersey—the motivation to enroll their children in Catholic schools is often multifaceted, based on academics as well as faith formation and the benefit of relationships within the school community.

Now, in the same way that there are limits to arguments based on academic excellence to attract more students in Catholic schools, there are also limits to arguments based on the role of schools in the transmission of the faith. Simply put, given the process of progressive secularization that appears to be at work in the United States and the shrinking share of the population that affiliates as Christian, emphasizing the transmission of the faith too much may not be conducive to attracting more students in Catholic schools if parents who are willing to consider Catholic schools but have not enrolled their children in one place a lower priority on the transmission of the faith than on other aspects.

Analytical Framework and Data

The brief review of the literature provided in the previous section focused on academic excellence and skills, and on the transmission of the faith and values as potential criteria for parents to choose Catholic schools for their children. These were a point of focus because they are some of the common motivations mentioned by parents for choosing Catholic schools, and also how many schools market themselves. The question asked in this article is whether the relative emphasis placed on those two dimensions—academic excellence and skills versus transmission of the faith and values—differs between parents enrolling their children in Catholic schools and parents choosing other schools. As mentioned earlier, of particular interest are the priorities of parents who are willing to consider Catholic schools but have not enrolled their children in one. This group seems to be the most immediate target to try to stem the long-term decline in enrollment in Catholic schools. If these parents were to have the same priorities for what children should learn in schools as parents who already have children enrolled in Catholic schools, there would be no trade-off in serving both groups to attract more students. But if parents willing to consider Catholic schools have different priorities than those with children already in Catholic schools, and if Catholic schools mostly cater to the priorities of their current students and parents, it may be difficult to convince new parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools—in which case, the long-term decline in enrollment may well continue.

To assess whether there is heterogeneity in parental priorities for what children should learn in schools, this article relies on market research data collected in 2017 by Mayhill Strategies with funding and support from the Catholic Education Philanthropy Working Group, FADICA, and the Philanthropy Roundtable. The market research led to the publication by FADICA and NCEA of a report available online entitled *The Catholic School Choice: Understanding the Perspectives of Parents and Opportunities for More Engagement* (FADICA & NCEA, 2018). The report team

adopted a mixed research methodology with quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The quantitative data were collected via an online survey of 1,403 adult Americans (aged 18 and above) between March 31 and April 11, 2017. As several target groups were oversampled (including Hispanic parents), sample weights based on the U.S. Census and findings from the Pew Research Foundation were used to adjust population shares to reflect the demographic profile of the adult American population. Details on the survey and its findings are in the report from FADICA and NCEA.

This article provides a secondary analysis of the quantitative survey data to look at the heterogeneity in parental priorities for what children should learn in school, including between parents with children already enrolled in and parents willing to consider Catholic schools. This analysis was not conducted at this level of detail in the survey report, but could be informative for the future of Catholic schools. Specifically, the focus in this article is on the following question, asked in the survey: “In your opinion, which of the following are the three most important areas of focus for K–12 schools in your area?” Though some respondents are adults with no children (yet), most are parents. For simplicity, I therefore use the term “parents” as opposed to “adults” in describing the results of the secondary analysis I performed with the data.

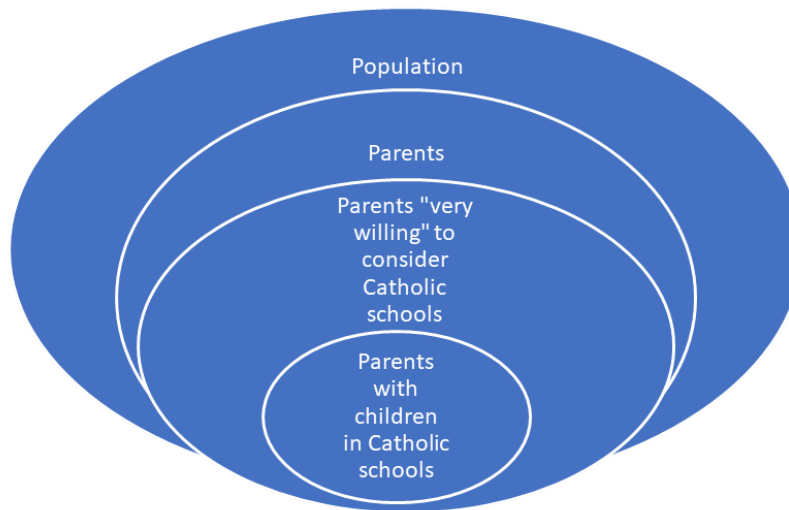
Nine potential responses to this question were included in the survey questionnaire: a) preparing children for college; b) preparing children to successfully enter the job market; c) teaching children to care about their community; d) developing individuals with a sound moral base; e) teaching children strong in-person communication skills; f) encouraging individual and critical thinking; g) measuring and monitoring student progress consistently; h) deepening children’s relationship with their religious faith; and i) teaching children to accept and embrace diversity. When questions were asked in the survey about parental priorities, the focus was on the parents’ priorities for their youngest child. The order in which responses were listed was randomized to avoid bias in response rates related to their order. This question helps in assessing what parents think about the role of schools in educating their children, and whether some roles matter to them more than others. In combination with another question asked in the survey about the parents’ willingness to consider Catholic schools for their children, this question makes it feasible to assess whether there is heterogeneity in parental priorities between parents already enrolling their (youngest) child in a Catholic school and parents willing to consider Catholic schools but not having enrolled their (youngest) child in one.

The analysis proceeds according to the groups of parents considered in Figure 1. The first and largest group consists of the full sample of the survey, which is meant to be representative of the overall adult population in the United States. The second group consists of the subset of parents in the adult population—since only parents have children to send to school. Among parents, some are “very willing” to consider Catholic schools for their children (as already mentioned, this group

can be identified based on responses to other questions in the survey), while others may not be interested. Clearly, the set of parents “very willing” to consider Catholic schools for their children is a potential target group for Catholic schools. Finally, some parents have enrolled their children in Catholic schools while other parents have not. While there may be outliers, each of the groups identified in Figure 1 typically comprise a subset of respondents in the larger group, in that to enroll a child in a Catholic school, parents must be willing to consider the schools for their child. In practice, this is observed.

Figure 1

Note. Source: Author.



As shown in Table 1, according to the survey, 6.2% of the youngest children of parents responding to the survey are in Catholic schools. This estimate appears to be slightly on the high side since administrative data suggest that the market share of Catholic schools nationally is at less than five percent for primary education, and less than three percent at the secondary level (on estimating the market shares of Catholic schools using administrative data, see Wodon [2021b]). Nevertheless, when considering the share of parents stating that they are “very willing” to consider Catholic schools for their children (27.1% of the survey sample), the current market share of Catholic schools appears to be on the low side in comparison to the level of interest among parents. This suggests potential for growth, or at least for stemming the long-term decline in enrollment. The challenge is thus to convince a larger share of parents “very willing” to consider Catholic schools to follow through and enroll their children in a Catholic school. This requires paying attention to their priorities for what their children should learn in school, but the potential uptake could be

substantial.

Table 1

Willingness to Consider Catholic School and Market Share of Catholic Schools (%)

	Share of parents
Willingness to consider Catholic schools	
Very willing	27.1
Somewhat willing	24.0
Somewhat unwilling	16.5
Very unwilling	25.5
Never heard/don't know	6.9
Total	100.0
Number of observations	1,058
	Share of students
Market share by type of school	
Public schools	72.5
Public charter schools	6.4
Magnet schools	2.7
Private non-religious schools	5.7
Catholic schools	6.2
Other religious schools	2.2
Home schooling	3.6
Other type of schooling	0.8
Total	100.0
Market shares of Catholic schools from administrative data	
Primary	4.7
Secondary	2.4

Note. Author's estimation using 2017 survey data for FADICA and NCEA (2018). The share of students by type of school is based on parental responses in the survey for their youngest child. By contrast, the market share of Catholic schools from administrative sources is based on data from the Office of Church Statistics and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as discussed in Wodon (2021b).

Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in School

To explore differences in priorities among parents for what their children should learn in school, Table 2 presents the share of respondents who chose each of the allowed responses in the survey according to the four groups in Figure 1, namely a) the overall population; b) all parents; c) parents stating that they are “very willing” to consider Catholic schools; and d) parents with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools. Since respondents could choose 3 priorities for what their children should learn in school, shares in Table 2 sum to 300%. Responses have been ranked

according to two broad categories of priorities: those related to academic excellence and the skills that children should acquire, and those related to the transmission of the faith and values. While the classification of some of the potential responses under academic excellence and skills versus faith and values could be debated, this simple categorization is useful for the analysis. The priorities are listed in Table 2 from the most to the least cited among the first sample, which represents the overall population.

Table 2

Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in School, Various Samples (%)

	Overall population	All parents	Very willing to consider Catholic Schools	Youngest child enrolled in Catholic School
Academic excellence and skills				
Critical thinking	53.4	53.3	48.3	34.6
Preparing for job market	46.8	47.7	33.3	34.9
Preparing for college	42.7	42.4	40.4	33.7
Communication skills	38.9	39.4	37.8	39.7
Measuring progress	32.5	31.6	31.1	30.6
Faith transmission and values				
Embracing diversity	29.1	25.0	32.0	22.6
Sound moral base	29.0	30.6	33.2	41.9
Care about community	18.2	19.1	24.4	27.9
Deepening the faith	9.6	10.9	19.5	34.2
Total	300.0	300.0	300.0	300.0
Number of observations	1,403	1,201	332	71

Note. Author's estimation using 2017 survey data for FADICA and NCEA (2018).

For the full sample, regardless of whether respondents have children, the top five priorities are all related to academic excellence and skills, including success in college and in the job market (noting that some of these priorities also have inherent value independent of their usefulness for college and the labor market). The other four priorities related to faith and values are ranked lower. Results are similar for parents in general—unsurprising, since most of the respondents in the survey are parents.

By contrast, for parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school, moral values rank much higher. Indeed, developing a sound moral base ranks first, followed by communications skills, and deepening one's faith essentially ties up with critical thinking and being ready for the job market. Finally, for parents "very willing" to consider Catholic schools for their children, results are typically closer to those observed for all parents than for parents with children in Catholic schools, but priorities related to faith and values score on average higher than is the case for all parents. Note that this sample includes parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school. As one example, for those "very willing" to consider Catholic schools whether or not they have their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools, embracing diversity and developing a sound moral base matter as much as preparing children for the job market.

Table 3 provides estimates in a slightly different way. The first column in Table 3 presents the priorities of parents "very willing" to consider Catholic schools but who have not enrolled their youngest child in one. This is essentially a subset of the sample of all those "very willing" to consider Catholic schools, and potentially a key target group for Catholic schools to stem their long-term decline in enrollment. The second column reproduces the results in Table 2 for parents who have their youngest child in a Catholic school. The third column provides the differences in ratings between that group and those with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools. The gaps in ratings for the two groups are largest for critical thinking and embracing diversity (these are higher priorities for those who are "very willing" to consider Catholic schools but have not enrolled their youngest child in one) and for deepening the faith (a higher priority for those with a child enrolled in Catholic schools). While deepening the faith is not necessarily at odds with critical thinking and embracing diversity, the fact that the gaps in opposite directions are largest for those priorities is important to notice. The two groups seem to be aligned on many priorities, but less so on the role that Catholic schools should play in deepening the faith versus their role in promoting independent and critical thinking and embracing diversity.

Said differently, the results in Table 3 suggest both a specific identity for Catholic schools—in terms of the priorities of parents who have enrolled their youngest child in a Catholic school, and a potential trade-off between responding solely to the priorities of these parents and aiming to attract parents who are "very willing" to consider Catholic schools but have not enrolled their youngest child in one. In terms of size, as mentioned earlier, the second group (27.1% of the sample minus

Table 3

Differences in Priorities Between Parents Considering Catholic Schools but Not Enrolling Their Youngest Child and Parents with the Child Enrolled (%)

	Parents very willing to consider Catholic schools but with their youngest child not enrolled [1]	Parents with their youngest child enrolled in a Catholic school [2]	Differences in priorities [1]-[2]
Academic excellence and skills			
Critical thinking	51.1	34.6	16.5
Preparing for job market	33.1	34.9	-1.8
Preparing for college	41.5	33.7	7.8
Communication skills	36.8	39.7	-2.9
Measuring progress	31.0	30.6	0.4
Faith transmission and values			
Embracing diversity	34.1	22.6	11.5
Sound moral base	31.8	41.9	-10.1
Care about community	23.6	27.9	-4.3
Deepening the faith	16.8	34.2	-17.4
Total	300.0	300.0	NA
Number of observations	261	71	NA

Note. Author's estimation using 2017 survey data for FADICA and NCEA (2018).

6.2% of children already enrolled in Catholic schools) is much larger than the first (6.2% of the sample, and less than 5% according to administrative data).

A quick reading of the data could lead to misunderstandings about the importance of faith affiliation in driving parental priorities for what children should learn in school. While parents with their youngest child enrolled in Catholic schools do emphasize values as well as the role that schools may play in deepening the faith for their children, this does not mean that Catholics have the same priorities, or those priorities to the same extent. In the survey, Catholics account for about one fifth of the sample. Most Catholic parents do not send their children to Catholic schools; indeed, a majority rely on public schools. These parents may have priorities that differ from those of parents who send their children to Catholic schools. More generally, the relationships between faith affiliations and priorities for what children should learn in school may be complex, defying simple generalizations.

As an indication of these complex relationships, Table 4 presents the shares of respondents identifying various priorities for what children should learn in school by faith affiliation. Four groups are considered: Catholics, other Christians (Protestant or other non-Catholic Christian),

respondents affiliated with other religions (Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or other), and respondents stating no religious affiliation (atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion).

A few interesting stylized facts emerge from Table 4. First, fewer than 1 in 10 (9.3%) Catholics place a high priority on deepening the faith for what their children should learn in schools. This is a much lower proportion than for parents (Catholic or not) who have their youngest child in a Catholic school. This does not mean that Catholic parents do not care about deepening the faith for their children; for example, they may think that schools are not the best place to do so, or that schools have other missions that are more important given that deepening the faith can be done elsewhere.

Table 4

Parental Priorities for What Children Should Learn in School by Faith Affiliation (%)

	Catholic	Other Christian	Other religion	No religion
Skills				
Critical thinking	48.1	46.4	63.6	70.4
Preparing for job market	36.2	52.9	44.3	43.8
Preparing for college	43.9	41.0	41.6	46.1
Communication skills	43.1	36.3	52.1	33.7
Measuring progress	36.0	32.0	36.3	27.9
Values				
Embracing diversity	30.6	26.5	18.0	39.8
Sound moral base	29.2	35.2	27.3	14.4
Care about community	23.6	16.9	9.4	20.7
Deepening faith	9.3	12.9	7.3	3.1
Total	300.0	300.0	300.0	300.0
Number of observations	628	482	100	193

Note. Author's estimation using 2017 survey data for FADICA and NCEA (2018).

Another interesting finding is that respondents with no religious affiliation and those affiliated with non-Christian religions are the most likely to consider independent and critical thinking as a priority for what children should learn in school. The differences in the shares of parents stating that particular priority by faith affiliation (or the lack thereof) are especially large. Interesting as well is the importance granted to learning to care for the community, which is as high among parents with no religious affiliation as it is for Catholics and Christians, but apparently lower for those with another (non-Christian) faith affiliation. At the same time, these differences may not necessarily be related to faith affiliations themselves, to the extent that other individual characteristics correlated with faith affiliation may play a role. To dig a bit deeper into those

patterns, regression analysis is useful.

Correlates of Parental Priorities

Are there individual characteristics of parents associated with particular views about what children should learn in schools? This is a question that has been explored in the literature, as mentioned earlier. It is also a question that could have implications for efforts to attract new students. If parental priorities could be predicted reasonably well using observable characteristics, this could perhaps be used in marketing efforts, even if other ways to target specific groups could also be used.

To answer the question, regression analysis can be used to look at associations between the respondents' characteristics and their priorities for what their children should learn in school. For simplicity, probit regressions for each priority are estimated separately. The outcome variables are whether respondents consider a particular goal as a priority for what their children should learn in school (i.e., whether that particular priority was one of the three chosen by respondents, noting that there is no ranking between these three top choices). The analysis is conducted for the whole sample, including respondents who do not (yet) have children themselves, but as before, the term "parents" is used, for simplicity (recall that most respondents are parents).

The regression analysis is tentative in that alternative model specifications could yield different results. For ease of interpretation, marginal effects (dF/dX) are reported at the mean of the sample. These effects should not be interpreted as implying causality; they are only indicative of associations between the respondents' characteristics and their priorities for what their children should learn in school. The idea is to identify marginal effects of some variables on stated priorities while controlling for other variables. For example, assume for the sake of the argument that middle- or high-income individuals may consider some priorities as more important than low-income individuals. This could be related to their income level, but also possibly to other variables, such as race or education level, and possibly even faith affiliation. Regression analysis helps disentangle various potential effects (associations), looking at each variable separately while controlling for the effects of other variables.

A wide range of independent variables are available in the survey for inclusion in the analysis. The strategy for the specification of the models is to include as many observable characteristics as possible, but focusing on variables that are likely to be exogenous, so that they do not depend on the priorities expressed by parents, which helps avoid endogeneity issues. The regression analysis includes the gender of the respondent (male or female), the respondent's age category (baby boomer or born earlier, Generation X or born between 1965 and 1976, and Generation Y or born after 1977); the respondent's race (White, Hispanic or Latino, African American, or other races, biracial, or multiracial); the respondent's location (urban, suburban, or rural); the

parental status of the respondent (parent of a child or not); the political affiliation of the respondent (Republican, Democrat, independent, other affiliation, or not registered); the yearly income of the household (below \$50,000, between \$50,000 and \$100,000, above \$100,000, or no response); the respondent's education level (high school or below, undergraduate, or graduate); the respondent's employment status (working full-time or part-time, or not working); the respondent's religious affiliation (Catholic, other Christian, other religious affiliations including Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, or no religious affiliation including atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion); the importance of religion for respondents with a religious faith (whether they consider their faith as extremely or very important in shaping their daily life, or less important); the practice of religion for respondents with a religious faith (whether they attend services regularly, namely almost every week or more often); whether the respondents is an active Catholic for those who are Catholic (whether they consider themselves to be a somewhat active or very active Catholic); and the respondent's experience with Catholic schools as a child (namely whether the respondent went to Catholic school at any level as a child and if so whether he/she had a poor experience while in Catholic school).

Table 5 provides the results for each of the nine priorities. The following abbreviations are used to report results for each priority: a) College = preparing children for college; b) Jobs = preparing children to successfully enter the job market; c) Caring = teaching children to care about their community; d) Values = developing individuals with a sound moral base; e) Comms. = teaching children strong in-person communication skills; f) Thinking = encouraging individual and critical thinking; g) Progress = measuring and monitoring student progress consistently; h) Faith = deepening children's relationship with their religious faith; and i) Diversity = teaching children to accept and embrace diversity.

The interpretation of marginal effects that are statistically significant is as follows: a value of 0.050 indicates that controlling for other factors, the variable is associated with an increase of 5.0 percentage points in the likelihood that the respondent considers the goal as a priority. For example, the value of -0.059 for men for the dependent variable "College" suggests that controlling for other factors, men are 5.9 percentage points less likely than women (the reference category) to consider that preparing students for college should be a key priority for schools. Not all effects are statistically significant—those that are can be identified with asterisks, depending on the level of statistical significance.

A number of comments can be made on the results. A first result is that to a great extent, the independent variables included in the analysis do not seem to be associated with a higher or lower likelihood of choosing specific priorities for what children should learn in school. Most coefficients are not statistically significant, suggesting that the association between most variables and parental priorities is not statistically different from zero. This in itself is an important finding. It suggests

that other individual characteristics, some of which may not easily be observed in standard surveys, likely matter more than the observed characteristics that have been included in the analysis. It also suggests that one should not make quick generalizations about how some groups of respondents may have different priorities than other groups based on some simple characteristics. Finally, it suggests that relying on most of those observable characteristics for marketing efforts to target groups of parents who may have particular priorities may not work well. The same would apply for using these characteristics to target parents who might be “very willing” to consider Catholic schools. The predictive power of such regressions tends to be low because the independent variables tend to be too generic. For targeting purposes, when aiming to identify parents with an interest in Catholic schools, other variables, for example related to religiosity, may work better.

Consider first the role of variables such as gender, age, location, parental status, political affiliation, income, education, work status, and race. For the most part, these variables do not seem to affect priorities in a systematic way. Coefficients are statistically significant in a few cases, but one should not infer too much from those cases since patterns across similar types of priorities do not emerge clearly. There are a few exceptions, however. The first is that respondents with a college education seem to place more emphasis on the role of schools to teach children to care about their community; this may reflect the fact that college-educated individuals in the United States tend to be more progressive, politically speaking, on average than individuals with only a high school education—although one should be careful not to equate a progressive outlook with caring for the community. Another exception is that some racial minorities (especially Latinos and the “others” category) seem to place less emphasis on communications skills and on the role of schools in developing a sound moral base. This of course does not imply that these groups place a lower emphasis on moral values in general. They may simply have other priorities for what schools should focus on for their children.

Consider next faith affiliation and the importance of faith in one’s life. The roles of faith affiliation and the importance of faith in one’s life seem more salient since a larger number of coefficients for these variables are statistically significant. This is not surprising, and as mentioned earlier, has been noted in the literature. But there seems to be a bit of a dichotomy at work. Apart from the issue of critical thinking already mentioned earlier, respondents with a religious affiliation tend to place a higher emphasis on priorities related to skills than respondents not affiliated with a religion. Yet, this effect may be counterbalanced by the fact that those for whom faith matters more in their life tend to place more emphasis on values. One should not overinterpret these findings, but they are suggestive of a difference between faith affiliation and the importance of one’s faith.

Religiosity seems to matter more for parental priorities than faith affiliation. I have found similar results in previous work in very different contexts. When looking at patterns of petty corruption in service delivery in Africa, individuals who are more religious tend to be less

susceptible to paying bribes to obtain a wide range of services, while faith affiliations matter less \$. Similarly, analysis of Gallup World Poll data suggests that individuals who are more religious tend to be more engaged in altruistic behaviors, such as giving to charitable organizations, volunteering their time, or helping strangers, while faith affiliation matters much less (Nayihouba & Wodon, 2022). The results observed here for parental priorities are in a way similar.

Consider finally the respondents' experience with Catholic schools when they were children themselves. By and large, respondents' experience with Catholic schools (or lack thereof) in their youth does not seem to relate in any systematic way to their priorities for what children should learn in school. This is perhaps a surprising result, in that there is an emerging body of research, including in this symposium for the *Journal of Catholic Education*, which suggests that attending Catholic school may affect a wide range of future behaviors as well as an individual's values in adulthood.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

Part of the motivation for this article was the realization that in comparison to the share of parents stating that they are "very willing" to consider Catholic schools for their children (27.1% of the sample), the current market share of Catholic schools could be considered relatively low (only 6.2% of parents in the sample have enrolled their youngest child in a Catholic school). There is scope for growth if Catholic schools were able to convince more parents to enroll their children in the schools. Yet apart from the issue of affordability that has not been discussed here, convincing a larger share of parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools requires paying attention to their priorities. How this is to be done will vary between individual schools and school districts, but some broad lessons seem to emerge from the analysis.

Table 5*Correlates of Identification of Priorities for What Children Should Learn in Schools (dF/dX)*

VARIABLES	College	Jobs	Comms.	Progress	Thinking	Caring	Values	Faith	Diversity
Gender (Ref. Female)									
Male	-0.059** (0.030)	0.024 (0.030)	-0.023 (0.024)	0.027 (0.027)	0.059** (0.030)	0.025 (0.031)	-0.014 (0.028)	-0.004 (0.016)	-0.031 (0.028)
Age (Ref. Older)									
Generation X	-0.035 (0.040)	0.057 (0.041)	0.010 (0.035)	-0.030 (0.036)	0.032 (0.040)	0.016 (0.041)	-0.055 (0.037)	0.004 (0.023)	0.005 (0.039)
Generation Y	-0.102*** (0.037)	-0.041 (0.038)	0.042 (0.031)	-0.013 (0.034)	0.004 (0.037)	0.073* (0.038)	-0.034 (0.035)	0.023 (0.020)	0.056 (0.035)
Race (Ref. White)									
Hispanic/Latino	0.085** (0.040)	-0.017 (0.040)	-0.004 (0.032)	-0.081** (0.033)	-0.080** (0.038)	0.014 (0.040)	0.065* (0.039)	-0.004 (0.020)	0.019 (0.037)
African American	0.050 (0.055)	-0.010 (0.054)	-0.029 (0.042)	-0.071* (0.043)	-0.001 (0.054)	0.042 (0.054)	0.054 (0.053)	0.006 (0.027)	-0.033 (0.048)
Other races	0.024 (0.056)	0.069 (0.056)	0.041 (0.048)	-0.082* (0.043)	-0.102** (0.051)	-0.103* (0.056)	0.042 (0.053)	0.036 (0.034)	0.082 (0.054)
Location (Ref. Suburban)									
Urban	-0.017 (0.032)	0.023 (0.032)	0.037 (0.027)	0.005 (0.029)	-0.029 (0.031)	-0.103*** (0.032)	0.012 (0.030)	0.022 (0.017)	0.030 (0.030)
Rural	0.023 (0.036)	0.028 (0.036)	-0.004 (0.030)	0.047 (0.034)	0.001 (0.036)	-0.004 (0.037)	-0.019 (0.034)	-0.004 (0.020)	-0.076** (0.032)
Parental status (ref. Not a parent)									
Parent	-0.019 (0.041)	-0.020 (0.041)	0.038 (0.032)	-0.004 (0.037)	0.044 (0.039)	0.066 (0.042)	-0.041 (0.039)	-0.001 (0.023)	-0.057 (0.040)
Political affiliation (Ref. Dem.)									
Republican	-0.014 (0.035)	0.064* (0.035)	-0.032 (0.027)	0.025 (0.031)	0.016 (0.034)	0.035 (0.035)	0.004 (0.033)	0.020 (0.019)	-0.120*** (0.030)
Independent	0.013 (0.033)	0.005 (0.033)	-0.039 (0.026)	0.033 (0.031)	-0.036 (0.033)	0.044 (0.034)	0.028 (0.032)	0.001 (0.018)	-0.045 (0.030)

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<i>Table 5 continued</i>									
VARIABLES	College	Jobs	Comms.	Progress	Thinking	Caring	Values	Faith	Diversity
Income (Ref. Low income)									
Medium income	0.039 (0.033)	0.003 (0.033)	-0.038 (0.026)	0.006 (0.030)	-0.094*** (0.032)	0.031 (0.033)	0.012 (0.031)	0.018 (0.018)	0.016 (0.031)
High income	0.068 (0.045)	-0.001 (0.044)	-0.032 (0.034)	-0.037 (0.038)	-0.054 (0.042)	0.040 (0.045)	0.016 (0.042)	0.056* (0.030)	-0.069* (0.040)
Income not declared	-0.069 (0.103)	-0.031 (0.106)	-0.060 (0.072)	0.131 (0.105)	0.088 (0.107)	-0.104 (0.107)	-0.013 (0.099)	0.026 (0.055)	0.027 (0.103)
Education (Ref. HS/below)									
College—undergraduate	-0.025 (0.035)	-0.043 (0.035)	0.004 (0.029)	0.044 (0.031)	-0.053 (0.034)	0.111*** (0.035)	-0.015 (0.033)	-0.021 (0.019)	0.001 (0.032)
College—graduate	-0.024 (0.048)	0.000 (0.048)	0.058 (0.043)	-0.038 (0.042)	-0.034 (0.047)	0.091* (0.048)	0.010 (0.045)	-0.037** (0.018)	-0.014 (0.045)
Work (Ref. Not employed)									
Employed	0.052 (0.032)	-0.019 (0.032)	0.006 (0.026)	0.048* (0.028)	-0.010 (0.031)	-0.068** (0.032)	0.016 (0.030)	-0.001 (0.017)	-0.029 (0.030)
Faith (Ref. Not affiliated)									
Catholic	0.027 (0.049)	0.002 (0.048)	-0.036 (0.038)	-0.013 (0.046)	0.092* (0.048)	-0.120** (0.050)	0.092** (0.047)	-0.031 (0.032)	-0.002 (0.045)
Christian	0.008 (0.048)	0.081* (0.048)	-0.085** (0.036)	0.036 (0.045)	0.012 (0.048)	-0.144*** (0.048)	0.105** (0.047)	0.019 (0.031)	-0.019 (0.044)
Other religion	-0.024 (0.064)	0.062 (0.065)	-0.096** (0.040)	0.044 (0.063)	0.139** (0.066)	-0.093 (0.066)	0.167** (0.067)	-0.016 (0.032)	-0.130*** (0.049)
Importance of religion									
Faith important	-0.064* (0.035)	-0.054 (0.035)	0.010 (0.029)	0.095*** (0.030)	0.072** (0.034)	-0.018 (0.035)	-0.044 (0.033)	0.068*** (0.018)	-0.052 (0.033)
Attending services regularly	0.008 (0.035)	-0.048 (0.034)	0.010 (0.029)	0.046 (0.031)	-0.100*** (0.033)	-0.063* (0.035)	0.013 (0.033)	0.081*** (0.021)	0.024 (0.033)
Active Catholic	-0.011 (0.044)	-0.032 (0.044)	0.001 (0.035)	0.031 (0.041)	-0.018 (0.043)	-0.025 (0.045)	0.003 (0.042)	0.029 (0.028)	0.031 (0.042)
School in childhood									

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<i>Table 5 continued</i>									
VARIABLES	College	Jobs	Comms.	Progress	Thinking	Caring	Values	Faith	Diversity
Attended Catholic school	-0.046 (0.038)	-0.009 (0.038)	0.019 (0.032)	0.079** (0.036)	-0.064* (0.037)	-0.044 (0.039)	0.002 (0.036)	0.025 (0.021)	0.024 (0.036)
Poor exp. in Catholic school	0.084 (0.072)	-0.054 (0.069)	-0.014 (0.056)	-0.042 (0.059)	0.104 (0.072)	0.036 (0.071)	0.058 (0.069)	-0.055** (0.023)	-0.095 (0.058)
Observations	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403	1,403
Pseudo-R-squared	0.0162	0.0238	0.0209	0.0396	0.0267	0.0381	0.0112	0.132	0.0395
Log-likelihood	-944.4	-931	-715.5	-797.3	-915.3	-933.9	-870.4	-412	-834.3

Note. Author's estimation using 2017 survey data for FADICA and NCEA (2018). Standard errors in parenthesis. Levels of statistical significance: *** for $p < 0.001$, ** for $p < 0.05$, * for $p < 0.1$.

Let me suggest three potential implications for Catholic schools. While these implications may reveal some of my own biases, they do also emerge from the data.

First, Catholic schools need to compete more forcefully in the areas of academic excellence and the acquisition of skills. In the population as a whole and among parents willing to consider Catholic schools for their children, ensuring that the schools they select for their children prepare them well for college and the labor market, while also equipping them with other skills, is paramount. For young people, finding a good job is harder today than it was decades ago. Schools have a duty to equip their students with the skills they need to succeed. For some time, Catholic schools benefited from a reputation of academic excellence. It is not clear whether this is still the case. On average, for most students, the literature suggests that Catholic schools may not perform much better than other types of schools in the United States. As to the performance of schools in the United States in comparison to other countries, measures from international student assessments suggest that the United States is not doing as well as it should. There can therefore be no complacency. There may have been a Catholic school advantage in the past, and Catholic schools may still provide opportunities for low-income students that these students would not have had elsewhere, but this is not guaranteed. The (2018) market research report produced by FADICA and NCEA suggests that, in many areas, Catholic schools may be falling behind. This is a wake-up call, confirmed indirectly by the analysis of parental priorities in this article.

Second, Catholic schools need to think hard about how they can help students deepen their faith. For parents with their youngest child in a Catholic school, deepening the faith is an important priority. It ranks below an emphasis on a sound moral base and communication skills, but at the same level as critical thinking, preparing for the job market, or preparing for college. However, for parents “very willing” to consider Catholic schools but who have not enrolled their child in one, deepening the faith is at the very bottom of their priorities. This does not imply that these parents do not care about deepening their children’s faith. They may simply believe that the main role of schools is not to deepen the faith of children if this can be done at home or in church. Or they may have more pressing demands for schools. Attracting these parents to Catholic schools does not mean that the schools should abandon their Catholic identity, but rather that they should think carefully about the “how to.”

Let me clarify what I mean through a digression. A decade ago, in a report for the NCEA, the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (2012) proposed a set of standards and benchmarks for Catholic schools. Based on 9 defining characteristics of Catholic schools, 13 standards were suggested for policies, programs, structures, and processes in 4 key domains: mission and Catholic identity, governance and leadership, academic excellence, and operational vitality. In addition, to monitor those standards, benchmarks were suggested with observable, measurable descriptors for the standards. The first four standards relate to the Catholic identity of the schools. They encourage

schools to a) be guided and driven by a clearly communicated mission that embraces a Catholic Identity rooted in Gospel values; b) provide a rigorous academic program for religious studies and catechesis in the Catholic faith; c) provide opportunities outside the classroom for student faith formation, participation in liturgical and communal prayer, and action in service of social justice; and d) provide opportunities for adult faith formation and action in service of social justice. A total of 21 benchmarks are associated with those 4 standards, but none of them pertain to how Catholic schools should welcome students of all faiths and promote a dialogue about spirituality and religion among students of different faiths. This could be an omission, but is still striking.

The standards and benchmarks make half a dozen references to a foundational document of the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) entitled *The Catholic School*. This is very welcome, but there is little reflection in the standards and benchmarks on the fact that, citing *Gravissimum Educationis*, *The Catholic School* explicitly states that “first and foremost the Church offers its educational service to ‘the poor or those who are deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith’” (n 58). The mission of Catholic schools is not only to transmit the faith to those who are Catholic, but also to welcome those who may be far from the faith or have another faith. One could probably argue that Catholic schools have a responsibility to find ways to deepen the faith not only of students who are Catholic, but also of students who are not and who should feel free to express their faith in Catholic schools. The point is not to critique the standards and benchmarks adopted for Catholic schools in the United States, but rather to note that there may be a tension between some of these standards and efforts to reach out to parents who may not be Catholic but could have an interest in Catholic schools.

Third, the findings about the emphasis (or lack thereof) placed by various groups of parents on the role of schools in deepening their children’s faith may be related to findings about the priority (or lack thereof) granted by various groups of parents to the role of schools in teaching children to accept and embrace diversity. It is striking to see how few parents with children in Catholic schools include an emphasis on embracing diversity in their three top priorities in comparison to parents willing to consider Catholic schools but not having enrolled a child in one. Related to the previous point, if the deepening of the faith in Catholic schools is done in a manner that does not respect diversity—including diversity in religious beliefs—this may exacerbate a perception that Catholic schools not only may lack diversity in their student body, but that they may also not be welcoming for all.

Now, one should not overstate the implications of the very limited analysis conducted in this article. There are limitations to the analysis as well as the data being used. For example, that parents had to choose from a closed set of response options in the survey when stating their priorities for what children should learn in school may mean missing other priorities that parents might have chosen had they been listed in the questionnaire, or if the question had been open-

ended. While the survey was meant to be nationally representative and has a decent sample size, such data may not provide the more in-depth insights that could be revealed from more in-depth interviews. There is also a wealth of other information available in the survey that was not used here due to lack of space but could be used to better understand the implications of the data for the Catholic identity of the schools and their operational vitality. Still, the hope is that the results shared will provide some food for thought.

In closing, it may be worth noting that the analysis in this article may have some relevance for debates on ensuring that education systems allow educational pluralism, which can be loosely defined as ensuring the availability and sustainability of different educational options for parents. If parents sending their children to different types of schools have different priorities for what their children should learn in school, this is *prima facie* evidence of the fact that from the parents' point of view, school choice matters. Some parents may again place a strong emphasis on the role that schools play in shaping their children's values and faith, while other parents may not. Those parents may prefer schools to focus on other responsibilities. By providing choice, the coexistence of different types of schools helps respond to the heterogeneity in parental priorities about what the mission of schools should be. This in turn can be vital for liberal democracies in allowing different viewpoints to exist and indeed compete on what the primary role of schools (and the vision of a good life) should be.

The importance of the right of parents to choose within reasonable bounds the type of education that their children should receive is enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). That Article states that “[e]veryone has the right to education,” that it should be free and compulsory, at least at the elementary level, and equally accessible to all based on merit at higher levels. The Article states next that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Educating the whole person is not a prerogative of Catholic or religious schools—it should be (and often is) an aspiration for all schools. Finally, and this relates to school choice, Article 26 states that “[p]arents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” When parental priorities are heterogenous, the ability for parents to choose between different types of schools for their children is a necessity for educational pluralism and it matters for the fulfilment of the right to education. As I have argued elsewhere, Catholic schools contribute in an important way to educational pluralism and thereby to the right to education (Wodon, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c). Unfortunately, in the United States, measures of educational pluralism based on the market share of various types of schools are in decline. Stemming the long-term decline in enrollment in Catholic schools would help ensure that parents indeed have the ability to “choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”

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